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INTRODUCTION



Women and radio: sounding out new paths in women's history

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ABSTRACT

Since its early introduction in the domestic sphere in the 1920s, radio has been used as a medium for the expression of women's voices, needs and concerns. In this introduction we would like to mobilise an understanding of radio as a vital source for doing women's history. Women's radio programming, women broadcasters, and women listeners provide a lens through which a number of histories can be analysed. This introduction provides an overview of the historical relationship between women and radio. It is further dedicated to research that explores the overlapping spaces of radio and women's history, and in particular, points to how radio-related source material can provide new points of departure for women's history.

My desktop is a transnational audio time machine: through it, I can listen to women's voices across different eras and continents. I can feel my heart beating faster as I listen to one of the earliest known recordings in existence: Florence Nightingale's voice, crackly, barely decipherable, seems buried in a wax cylinder recording made in 1890: "God bless my dear old comrades of Balaclava and bring them safe to shore" [...]. I forward my listening to 1971. I can hear New York feminists conducting a live on-air "housework consciousness raising" on the Pacifica Radio station WBAI NYC. Mid-1990s: I feel like I am actually sitting among a group of Irish women around a kitchen table in the terraced house that is Radio Pirate Women/Women's Scéal Radio (*Scéal* is Irish for gossip or stories) in Galway. They discuss music, international politics, activist theater, Greenham Common, wages for housework, and how to get an abortion. 1992: I am inspired by the feisty jingles made by the Girls Express team from the Fem FM Archive in Bristol, United Kingdom.¹

Caroline Mitchell, an expert on radio, participation and community media, here describes her digital audio desktop as both a 'time machine and a mirror' that is 're-sounding, representing, and with the potential to recirculate women's activism, creativity, and voices'.² Mitchell's words play a twofold purpose here. First, they highlight the very long historical relationship between women, sound recording technology, and radio. Second, her words point to the connections between radio and women's (feminist) activism. This themed section of the *Women's History Review* is dedicated to research that explores the overlapping spaces of radio and women's history. The articles presented take up this challenge by considering radio as a source for doing women's history.³ The authors address several key questions: what can radio tell us about women's experiences and agency? How can radio-

related source material provide new points of departure for women's history? How does radio history intersect with other fields of women's history and experiences?

To begin with, histories of media and communications technology can provide important point of departures for the exploration of broader economic, social and cultural phenomena. In recent years there has been a wider recognition for using media sources in doing history, both in education as well as research. In discussing 'media products as historical artefacts', Adrian Bingham drew the attention to media content and sources as valuable evidence in the development of society and thus of value to the historian.⁴ Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara have further encouraged interdisciplinary work across the boundaries of Women's History and Media, arguing that the study of the media should become 'an integral part of the study of women in the twentieth century'.⁵ We would like to mobilise, in particular, an understanding of *radio* as a vital source for historical analysis and by doing so, expand the scope of sources for doing women's history.

Why draw our attention to radio? Compared to print media, film and television, radio has remained fairly invisible and marginalised within media studies and media history—and has therefore to some extent received less consideration as a source for women's history. As Kate Lacey argues, however, 'the history of radio is, or should be, foundational for understanding the emergence and evolution of modern forms of mediation and, indeed, mediatization'.⁶ As such, radio represents a prolific and valuable repository for investigating women's experiences and agency. This is partly due to the longevity of the medium and its intimate relationship to women. Since its initial embedding in the domestic spheres in the 1920s, radio has been used as a medium for the expression of women's voices, needs and concerns—and, Lacey argues, it represented a paradigmatic shift in the reordering of public and private space.⁷ A public medium that entered the private domestic setting, radio 'bridged' and connected gendered spaces, and re-defined and blurred the lines between the supposedly private and public spheres.⁸ From its early days radio provided valuable information and education as well as companionship for listeners at home, who, especially during daytime, were often largely women. The daily activities of housewives and mothers, especially, were therefore influential in shaping early radio's general development.⁹

To date, women and radio have mainly been examined within specific national contexts or narratives, such as Argentina and Uruguay, Australia, Britain, Germany, Sweden, Turkey, and the United States, to name some examples.¹⁰ Together, these studies have often focused on specific programmes for and by women, institutional contexts, individual lives and work of women broadcasters, controversies, debates and issues over women's voices (both on and off air), and changing definitions of appropriate programming content for women listeners. These histories are significant and highlight the role played by women's radio in times of social change, political crisis and modernisation. In more recent years a number of transnational histories of women and radio have also emerged that have highlighted how radio's multiple border-crossing aspects have been entangled with various cross-border flows of women's labour, voices, and knowledge.¹¹ Many of the existing studies show, to borrow a phrase from Christine Ehrick, that 'women's growing visibility in the twentieth century was accompanied by a greater *audibility* as well', hence we should pay closer attention to radio within histories of women, gender and feminism.¹² Radio, as Lacey rightly observes, was informed and shaped by

the gender ideologies of the age but was also a site where gender relations could be contested, negotiated and redefined.¹³

The study of women's radio and women broadcasters has provided entry points for exploring constructions of citizenship and consumption.¹⁴ Radio has been involved in the process of modernisation and democratisation and therefore contributed to the integration of women into the public sphere.¹⁵ Recent scholarship has taken an interest in the 'hidden professions' of broadcasting, which feeds into the broader issue of gendered labour and women's labour histories.¹⁶ For example, as secretaries, sound technicians, and archivists, women have played important, skilled roles in many forms of 'behind-the-scenes' work.¹⁷ Radio can also open up issues in relation to women's larger public history, such as in programmes discussing and reframing collective events such as women's suffrage, or important historical figures, which have long been staples of women's programming.¹⁸

Each of the articles here uses a focus on radio to explore broader issues and questions that extend our knowledge and understanding of women's history. Kate Murphy's article, 'Brightening their leisure hours? The experiment of BBC Women's Hour, 1923–1925', traces the fledgling steps of programmes for women at the British Broadcasting Company (BBC) to reveal wider discussions about the position of middle-class women in the 1920s. Murphy's sources range from minutes of meetings to publications such as the *Radio Times*, and these provide a snapshot of the perception and expectations placed on middle-class women in particular, and how the programme makers struggled to define women's interests. Moving along from the dilemmas of targeting women as a specific audience, Emma Robertson's article 'Gendering Transnational Radio: Women Listeners and the BBC Empire and Overseas Services, 1932–1967', comes from the opposite direction, attempting to reconstruct the experiences of women listeners to the BBC's international broadcasts in the face of implicit assumptions of a male audience. Robertson's analysis of BBC audience research and letters from women listeners reveal not only women's embodied and sensory experience of living in the colonies but also uncovers important themes such as loneliness. Some women saw radio as a means to connect to the 'mother country' and also used the medium to imagine and even build intra-imperial and transnational networks. This material thus helps us to understand the gendered experience of the British Empire.

Women's radio provides a lens through which a number of sorts of transnational flows can be analysed. The following two articles are focused on the period after the Second World War, when radio proved to be a vital instrument for public and cultural diplomacy in the emerging Cold War. In 'Eleanor Roosevelt and Radio in Early Cold War France', Anya Luscombe provides an in-depth analysis of the radio work of Eleanor Roosevelt in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Roosevelt, Luscombe argues, had a long relationship with the radio medium and was well rehearsed in how to exploit its intimacy. Luscombe's close reading of radio programmes and radio commentaries made by Roosevelt allow us to view Roosevelt as an actor of public diplomacy. Finally, further building on theme of women on the international stage is Alexander Badenoch and Kristin Skoog's article, 'Your Woman Friend in the West: Women Broadcasters and the Cold War'. The article investigates the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) founded in 1951. The IAWRT offers an insight into the intersections between women broadcasters and international women's organisations and how these, in turn, were shaped by the tensions of the Cold War. Both of these articles draw heavily on materials

not held in archives of broadcasting institutions, but in personal papers held elsewhere. This raises the crucial point that tracing the paths of women in broadcasting requires us to look beyond the archives of broadcasting institutions themselves, where traces of women's work can sometimes be scarce or rendered invisible by archiving practices.¹⁹

'Used well', Kate Lacey argues, "'radio" can become a tool with which to open up new avenues of enquiry'.²⁰ Specifically, women's radio programming and women broadcasters and listeners provide a lens through which a number of histories can be analysed. We hope the articles presented here will further demonstrate the use of radio as a lens through which women's history may be further discovered, interrogated and analysed, and at the same time, expand the scope of archives and resources for doing 'radio history'.

Notes

1. Caroline Mitchell, 'Re-sounding Feminist Radio: A Journey Through Women's Community Radio Archives', *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015): 126–7.
2. *Ibid.*, 127.
3. This themed section is a collection of articles drawn from activities of the Women's Radio in Europe Network (WREN) founded in 2012. See <https://womensradioineurope.org>.
4. Adrian Bingham, 'Media Products as Historical Artefacts', in *The Routledge Companion to British Media History*, eds. Martin Conboy and John Steel (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2015), 19–28. Bingham has also convincingly argued and showed, in his own research on gender, modernity and the popular press in interwar Britain, the value of popular newspapers for gender history. See Adrian Bingham, *Gender, Modernity, and the Popular Press in Inter-war Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).
5. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara, 'Introduction', in *Women and the Media: Feminism and Femininity in Britain, 1900 to the Present*, eds. Maggie Andrews and Sallie McNamara (London; New York: Routledge, 2014), 1–14, 1. See also recent work on the 'magazine' format and women (a media form spanning print media, television and radio) Laurel Forster, *Magazine Movements. Women's Culture, Feminisms and Media Form* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).
6. Kate Lacey, 'Up in the Air? The Matter of Radio Studies', *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 16, no. 2 (2018): 118.
7. See for US example Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (London; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 130–82.
8. See for example in Germany Kate Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies: Gender, German Radio, and the Public Sphere, 1923–1945* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996); see for a general discussion Kate Lacey, 'Continuities and Change in Women's Radio', in *More than a Music Box: Radio Cultures and Communities in a Multi Media World*, ed. Andrew Crisell (Oxford: Berghahn, 2003), 145–65; and for a British example Kristin Skoog, 'Neither Worker nor Housewife but Citizen: BBC's Woman's Hour 1946–1955', *Women's History Review* 26, no. 6 (2017): 953–74.
9. See for example Shaun Moores, *Media and Everyday Life in Modern Society* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), 43–56; and further building on this work see Maggie Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves: Broadcasting, Domesticity and Femininity* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2012).
10. For Argentina see Christine Ehrick, *Radio and the Gendered Soundscape: Women and Broadcasting in Argentina and Uruguay, 1930–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); for Australia see Jeannine Baker, 'Woman to Woman: Australian Feminists' Embrace of Radio Broadcasting, 1930s–1950s', *Australian Feminist Studies* 32, no. 93 (2017): 292–308; for Britain see Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), 70–147; Kate Murphy, *Behind the Wireless: A History of Early Women at the BBC* (London: Palgrave

- Macmillan, 2016); for Germany, see Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies*; Alexander Badenoch, 'Time Consuming: Women's Radio and the Reconstruction of National Narratives in Western Germany 1945–1948', *German History* 25, no. 1 (2007), 52–3; for Sweden see Karin Nordberg, *Folkhemmets röst: radion som folkbildare 1925–1950* (Stockholm/Stehag: Brutus Östlings Bokförlag Symposion, 1998), 319–52; for Turkey see Nazan Haydari, 'Sabun Köpüğü: Popular Culture, the Everyday, and Representation of Feminist Politics through Radio in Turkey', *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015), 108–25; and the US see Hilmes, *Radio Voices*. A broad, and growing, bibliography of scholarship on radio and women initially compiled by Caroline Mitchell is maintained at the website of the Women's history in Europe Network <https://womensradioineurope.org/resources/bibliography/>.
11. See José Emilio Pérez Martínez, 'Airing the Differences: An Approach to the Role of Women in the Spanish Free Radio Movement (1976–2014)', in *Connecting Women: Women, Gender and ICT in Europe in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, eds. Valérie Schafer and Benjamin Thierry (Cham: Springer, 2015), 47–60; Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch, 'Networking Women: The International Association of Women in Radio and Television', in *Broadcasting in the UK and US in the 1950s: Historical Perspectives*, eds. Jamie Medhurst, Sian Nicolas, and Tom O'Malley (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press, 2016), 189–218; Nazan Haydari, 'Desi Radio by and for the Panjabi Community: Citizens' Media, Gender, and Participation', in *Transnationalizing Radio Research: New Approaches to an Old Medium*, eds. Golo Föllmer and Alexander Badenoch (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2018), 65–72. Increasingly, considerations of gender have been incorporated into broader narratives of transnational broadcasting, eg Suzanne Lommers, *Europe—On Air: Interwar Projects for Radio Broadcasting* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012); Maria Rikitienskaia, 'European Radiotelegraphy and World War I: A Transnational Perspective, 1912–1927' (PhD Thesis, Università della Svizzera italiana, 2018).
 12. Christine Ehrick, 'Savage Dissonance': Gender, Voice, and Women's Radio Speech in Argentina, 1930–1945', in *Sound in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, eds. David Suisman and Susan Strasser (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 88 (our emphasis). See also the special issue *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015) on 'Women and Soundwork' edited by Michele Hilmes and Kate Lacey. See also the recent online exhibition of women pioneers at the BBC written and curated by Kate Murphy and Jeannine Baker <https://www.bbc.co.uk/historyofthebbc/women-pioneers>.
 13. Lacey, 'Continuities and Change in Women's Radio', 146–9.
 14. See Skoog, 'Neither Worker nor Housewife'; Andrews, *Domesticating the Airwaves*; Lacey, *Feminine Frequencies*; Baker, 'Woman to Woman'; Jennifer Hyland Wang, 'Producing a Radio Housewife: Clara, Lu "n" Em, Gendered Labor, and the Early Days of Radio', *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 1 (2018): 58–83.
 15. Lacey, 'Continuities and Change in Women's Radio'.
 16. *Feminist Media Histories* 1, no. 4 (2015) on 'Women and Soundwork' edited by Michele Hilmes and Kate Lacey; *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 2, no. 4 (2013) on the 'Hidden Professions of Television' edited by Andy O'Dwyer and Tim O'Sullivan. A recent issue of *Feminist Media Histories* was dedicated to 'Gendered Discrimination in the Creative Industries,' with particular focus on women working in film and television. See *Feminist Media Histories* 4, no. 4 (2018) edited by Vicky Ball and Laraine Porter.
 17. See for example Murphy, *Behind the Wireless*; and Carolyn J. Birdsall, 'Divisions of Labour: Radio Archiving as Gendered Work in Wartime Britain and Germany', in *Gender and Archiving: Past, Present, Future*, eds. N. Willems et al. (Jaarboek voor Vrouwengeschiedenis; Vol. 37, Hilversum: Verloren, 2017), 107–33; Alexander Badenoch and Berber Hagedoorn, 'TV on the Radio/Radio on Television: European Television Heritage as a Source for Understanding Radio History', *VIEW Journal of European Television History and Culture* 7, no. 13 (2018): 1–18.
 18. One programme that would lend itself to such a study is BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour*, which has been on air since October 1946 and is still a staple of Radio 4's schedule.

19. Rachel Moseley and Helen Wheatley, 'Is Archiving a Feminist Issue? Historical Research and the Past, Present, and Future of Television Studies', *Cinema Journal* 47, no. 3 (2008): 152–8; Kristin Skoog and Alexander Badenoch, 'Lessons from Lilian: Is Transnational (Media) History a Gendered Issue?' *Feminist Media Histories* 5, no. 3 (2019).
20. Kate Lacey, 'Ten Years of Radio Studies: The Very Idea', *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media* 6, no. 1 (2009): 29.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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